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Writing Center as Contact Zone: Resources for Mediation

by Jessica Murray, Florida Atlantic University

Paired with Jared Bezet's article, Jessica Murray's piece assesses the resources available to consultants as they introduce ESL writers to standard academic English.

Jessica Murray

When ESL writers write, they are attempting to be heard in an academic community. One of the academy's shortcomings is its disinclination to hear from writers who struggle with academic discourse. In a contact zone, such as a university that includes accomplished and novice academics, communication becomes a casualty (particularly with novices whose first language is not English). If writing centers and their staffs are the cultural mediators of this contact zone, then we must first be afforded the tools to do our work: a good text, skilled teachers, sufficient funding, and an un-marginalized place on the campus. Irrespective of these resources, however, writing consultants can provide ESL writers with knowledge of contrastive rhetorics and how a failure to acculturate to demands for standard American academic writing may limit their success at the university level.

A contact zone featuring professional and beginning academics becomes particularly divisive when ESL students new to the rigors of academia feel obligated to assimilate to writing standards of an American university rather than acculturate to them. This issue is especially relevant in the **University Center for Excellence in Writing** (UCEW) at **Florida Atlantic University**, where almost forty percent of the students utilizing the UCEW speak English as a second language. This statistic is consistent with FAU's diverse student population, with forty percent of its students claiming ethnic and international origins.**[1]**

In our writing center we frequently find ourselves working with frustrated writers whose only significant writing *problem*, according to an untrained eye, is that their first language is not English. It is easy for instructors untrained in ESL

to write off non-standard English as laziness or as ignorance. Writing center consultants not only inherit stymied writers but are also expected to *fix the problems*. The writing issues some untrained teachers label as problems, ESL-trained consultants and instructors call differences. In this contentious difference of opinions, we wondered why ESL writers have not been included in the dialogue.

As contact zone mediators between ESL writers and the American academy, writing consultants help ESL students negotiate writing success in response to the university's demand for standard American academic prose. As such, we tend to do as Muriel Harris suggests in her 1994 article "Individualized Instruction in Writing Centers: Attending to Cross-Cultural Differences." In order to "attend to cross-cultural differences," Harris offers three guidelines for writing center consultants:

1. Look for patterns of thinking that seem at odds with accepted patterns in American discourse conventions.
2. Look for hidden or unarticulated assumptions.
3. Look for tendencies to create stereotypes in our thinking. (107-108)

Diligent as her work is, there is a deficiency in Harris's article when she considers "to what degree we ought to acquaint students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds with the norms expected in the academic society they have entered" (108). Harris delegates the responsibility of "attending to cross-cultural differences" exclusively to writing centers, consultants, and tutors. Yet, how do writing consultants enact Harris's recommendations without using metadiscourse about contrastive rhetorics? This conversation between consultants and ESL writers may lessen the tension in the writing center contact zone because it includes them and mimics the activity of metadiscourse going on in universities. We recognize that this is neither an easy task nor a panacea. A conversation this complex, perhaps even unfamiliar, is not likely to be completed in a single session. We recommend, not unusually, that ESL writers make multiple visits to their writing centers where consultants can establish comfortable working relationships so that writers feel at ease in an environment exclusively devoted to writing.

To say that "Writing center theory specifies that we do not 'teach' students anything" (107) depends upon Harris's definitions of teaching and learning. If, for Harris, teaching is a punitive and prescriptive exercise, she is correct in saying that it has no function in the writing center. However, teaching can be suggestive, a series of choices for students to make on their own. We see this kind of teaching as inherently applicable in the writing center, where writers are wholly responsible for what they "learn" during each session. Metadiscourse is one strategy to suggest ways ESL writers can acculturate to the American academy so that the academy will welcome them. To overlook the conversation about contrastive rhetorics, however, is to inhibit a dialogue with the potential to inspire writers and encourage the learning process.

What is interesting about Harris's work is that she very clearly sets up a metadiscourse in her text, *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage*. The rhetoric she uses in this grammar manual is carefully calibrated such that it avoids prescription, offering instead information about preferences in American academic writing. She writes to ESL writers about culturally based writing practices, making it a point to include them in her textbook. In this way, it functions as a specific incarnation of metadiscourse. Despite the shortcoming

in her article, Harris's *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* becomes a talking point in this one because Harris's text was the grammar manual selected by FAU's Writing Committee to replace Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*. Scrutiny of the ESL sections in both manuals reveals interesting and subtle differences in the treatment of ESL writing issues, differences which make Harris's guide more useful than Hacker's in the context of writing center as contact zone.

While Hacker's and Harris's grammar textbooks each devote over twenty pages to ESL issues, Hacker's chapter entitled "ESL Trouble Spots" suggests ESL writing issues are hit-or-miss problems, not indications of language differences and rhetorical patterns. Harris's more syntactically sensitive chapter "ESL" acknowledges contrastive rhetorics outright. In terms of tone, Hacker's writing inadvertently privileges non-ESL writers over ESL writers. Hacker also writes *about* ESL writers not directly *to* them as Muriel Harris does. In Harris's ESL chapter, she directs these students to "talk with a tutor in the writing center" (249), in effect starting the conversation between ESL writers and writing center tutors. However, in her article, she does not illuminate ways tutors, consultants, and administrators could talk to ESL writers about ESL writing issues.

Because the grammar manual is an important tool in our consultations, it is important to us that it includes ESL writers and eases their acculturation into the American academy. This is why, at a widely diverse university such as FAU, Harris's grammar manual is preferable to Hacker's. Tutors and consultants can do more than simply reinforce the grammar manual's rules and guidelines and look for differences between ESL writing and expectations within the American academy. What may bridge the gap between simply looking for differences and substantial rhetorical inclusion may lie in the discussion about contrastive rhetorics, which has the potential to offer ESL students an expanded knowledge of their rhetorical options.

Note

[1]Most of these students' primary language is not English, and the UCEW's questionnaire indicates that our ESL writers list at least 28 different primary languages, not including English.